

YOUTH-LED INTERFAITH ADVOCACY AND COUNTER-CONSERVATISM: THE CASE OF PELITA IN WEST SUMATRA, INDONESIA

Zulfadli

Universitas Andalas, Indonesia
e-mail:
zulfadli@soc.unand.ac.id

Ilham Pramadia

Universitas Andalas, Indonesia
e-mail:
ilhampramadia01@gmail.com

Muhammad Wafi Muhadzib

Universitas Andalas, Indonesia
e-mail:
wafimuhammad2003@gmail.com

Kurnia Aznar Putra

Universitas Andalas, Indonesia
e-mail: kurniaaznar16@gmail.com

Arival Aryadi

Universitas Andalas, Indonesia
e-mail: arivalaryadi24@gmail.com

Rayhan Febran Seprapdi

Universitas Andalas, Indonesia
e-mail:
rayhanfebranseprapdi@gmail.com

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Corresponding Author:

Zulfadli

Universitas Andalas, Indonesia
e-mail: zulfadli@soc.unand.ac.id

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the involvement of the Interfaith Youth Community (Pemuda Lintas Agama, or PELITA) in Padang as an active movement engaged in social advocacy against Islamic conservatism in West Sumatra. This youth community carries out various interfaith advocacy activities and peace campaigns and facilitates spaces for social encounters to promote tolerance and respond to incidents of intolerance and discrimination in the region. The research uses a qualitative method with an interfaith advocacy approach. The findings reveal that the active role of youth as initiators and drivers of counter-narratives to religious conservatism not only helps to curb the growing dominance of conservative discourse in public spaces but also attracts other young people to engage in issues of diversity. Through its wide range of activities, youth engagement in diversity-related issues proves to be highly significant and strategic in constructing a counter-narrative to religious conservatism, particularly in the face of passive (permissive) tendencies among the majority group. This research offers recommendations and key lessons in encouraging active youth involvement in interfaith advocacy as a means to promote tolerance and inspire similar movements across other regions in Indonesia.

Keywords: *Interfaith Advocacy, Youth, Religious Conservatism, Counter Religious Conservatism, Intolerance*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan keterlibatan komunitas Pemuda Lintas Agama (Pelita) Padang sebagai salah satu gerakan yang aktif dalam melakukan advokasi sosial kontra konservatisme Islam di Sumatera Barat. Komunitas anak-anak muda yang tergabung dalam Pemuda Lintas Agama (Pelita) menjalankan kegiatan advokasi lintas iman (*interfaith advocacy*), kampanye perdamaian, dan membangun ruang temu perjumpaan sosial dalam memajukan toleransi serta mengatasi berbagai peristiwa intoleransi, diskriminasi di wilayah Sumatera Barat. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan pendekatan *interfaith advocacy*. Hasil penelitian ini menemukan bahwa keterlibatan anak muda sebagai inisiator sekaligus penggerak dalam aktivitas advokasi kontra narasi konservatisme agama tidak hanya dapat mengurangi laju meningkatnya dominasi konservatisme agama dalam ruang publik akan tetapi juga telah menjadi daya tarik tersendiri bagi kalangan anak muda lainnya, tertarik dalam isu-isu keberagaman. Atas berbagai aktivitas yang dilakukannya, keterlibatan anak-anak muda dalam isu-isu keberagaman menjadi sangat penting dan strategis sebagai bentuk gerakan kontra narasi konservatisme agama di tengah kecenderungan diamnya (*permissive*) kelompok mayoritas atas meningkatnya konservatisme agama dalam berbagai bidang kehidupan. Penelitian ini memberikan rekomendasi sekaligus pembelajaran *lesson learned* dalam mendorong keterlibatan anak-anak muda aktif dalam kegiatan advokasi lintas iman dalam memajukan toleransi sehingga dapat menjadi gerakan serupa di berbagai wilayah lainnya di Indonesia.

Kata Kunci: *Advokasi Lintas Iman, Pemuda, Konservatisme Keagamaan, Kontra Konservatisme Keagamaan, Intoleransi*

INTRODUCTION

The involvement of young people as both initiators and driving forces in interfaith advocacy plays a strategic role in creating inclusive spaces for dialogue in response to the growing influence of religious conservatism across various spheres of life (Al Qurtuby, 2025). Amid cultural hybridization situations experienced by young people in facing social realities with uncertainty and intensive social interactions and encounters from different organizational, cultural, and religious affiliations, young people not only have the potential to become objects in religious conservatism but also become subjects in countering narratives of religious conservatism (Hasan, 2010; Irfan Abubakar dan Mohammad Nabil, 2018; Waliyuddin & Noor, 2022). Over the last two decades, religious conservatism has developed widely in various fields of life in Indonesia. Religious conservatism in multiple fields of life is not only in conservative religious understanding but also in social, political, and economic aspects. Populism movements to develop widely in social media (Burhani, 2016, 2020b; Halimatussa'diyah, 2020; Noorhaidi Hasan, Moch Nur Ichwan, Mibtadin, Ali Muhtarom, Fauzan Anwar Sandiah, 2019; Noorhaidi Hasan, 2012; Zulfadli, 2022). The development of religious conservatism in various fields of life has become a severe challenge to democracy and diversity in Indonesia, which is known as a plural-multicultural country because it consists of a diversity of ethnicities, cultures, languages, religions, and traditions (Hefner & Hefner, 2019; S. H. and A. R. A. Leonard C Sebastian, 2020). The post-New Order shift in Islam has been described as a "conservative turn." (Bruinessen, 2013; Van Bruinessen, 2011). Amid the strengthening of religious conservatism in various fields of life, the involvement of young people in the religious conservatism movement not only builds an alternative narrative to the dominance of religious conservatism but also reduces the monolithic view of religious conservatism in Indonesia.

The phenomenon of change towards "conservatism turn" is not only a national phenomenon but has also developed and expanded at the local political level in several regions in Indonesia, such as in West Java, South Sulawesi, Aceh, and West Sumatra (Buehler & Muhtada, 2016; Lanti et al., 2020; Mujiburrahman, 2013; Zulfadli, 2023). According to Sakai and Fauzia (2024), the development of Islamic conservatism in some of the regions above is related to the areas that have a strong Islamic base, both based on structural solid Islamic traditions such as Aceh, Banten, South Sulawesi, and strong cultural Islamic traditions such as East Java and West Sumatra (Sakai & Fauzia, n.d.) For the various increases in religious conservatism in various fields of public life, counter-narratives of religious conservatism are needed not only as a form of producing counter-discourse to religious conservatism but also as a form of movement in advocating freedom of religion and belief (Bagir, 2014).

After the New Order, West Sumatra is perceived to be one of the regions that experienced an increase in conservatism in terms of religion, culture, and politics (Sebastian, 2020; Zulfadli, 2024; Zulfadli et al., 2020). Such as the latest research results of the Center for the Study of Islam and Society (PPIM) (2020) show that the West Sumatra region is one of the areas with the highest distribution of social media conservatism in Hashtag issues related to the rejection of the Shi'a and Ahmadiyya minority groups and the rejection of the Liberal Islamic Network (Halimatussa'diyah, 2020, p. 45). Other surveys conducted by Maarif Institute (2016, 2107), Elsam (2018), and Setara Institute (2023) revealed that the low tolerance score related to the condition of freedom of religion and belief, which tends to put West Sumatra in the lowest position (Elsam, 2017; Ihsani & Yosarie, 2023; Muslim et al., 2018; Rais, 2016). The fact above shows that conservatism has experienced significant expansion and development in the Muslim public sphere in West Sumatra. The increase of religious conservatism in various aspects of life is not only caused by the weak counter-narrative of religious conservatism, but moderate groups tend to be the silent majority over various religious discourse productions developed by conservative groups. Counter-narratives to religious conservatism can reflect a critical attitude toward the approach adopted by conservative groups. Suppose the understanding and attitude of religious conservatism is understood as an approach that is textual, rigid and rejects more contextual interpretations. In that case, the progressive approach emphasizes inclusiveness,

openness, and contextuality. This progressive approach is essential as an effort to interpret religion more contextually, flexibly, and responsively to changing times. Thus, the counter-narrative to religious conservatism emphasizes the importance of inclusion, equality, and respect for diversity in society (Maghfuri, 2019).

So far, studies on the involvement of youth communities in countering narratives of religious conservatism have yet to be the primary concern of several previous researchers. Moreover, the counter-narrative of religious conservatism is driven by young people amid socio-structural conditions that are mostly dominated by certain religious and ethnic entities. So far, studies on the counter-narrative of religious conservatism tend to emphasize the following aspects: First, counter-narratives carried out by mainstream Islamic organizations such as Nahdatus Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah and other moderate organizations in countering narratives of religious conservatism (Arifianto, 2020; Burhani, 2020b; M.Iqbal, 2020; Menchik & Menchik, 2019; Nugroho et al., 2023). As the largest mainstream Islamic mass organization in Indonesia, with the support of human and organizational resources, it can counter the narrative of religious conservatism by promoting the middle path of the religious spectrum in religion (Anwar, 2017; Irawan, 2018). Counter-narratives against religious conservatism do not only occur in the offline world but also the digital world, such as those actively carried out by NU Online (Rahmawati & Heriyanto, 2023; Sefriyono, 2020). Second, countering the narrative of religious conservatism through educational institutions, especially Muslim schools, by developing moderate religious education as a counter to religious conservatism. Promoting moderate Islam as an alternative to conservative and radical views must be done massively, systematically, and institutionally, including in the world of education (Afrianty, 2012; Maghfuri, 2019; Zuhdi, 2018). Through education, it can be used as a means of counteracting or inhibiting the spread of conservative ideologies. Third, the counter-narrative of religious conservatism is carried out by activists of the interfaith dialogue community. Interfaith activists based in this community tend to be more active than prominent public intellectuals, as was often the case in the past (Jati et al., 2022). His findings show that advocacy for interfaith dialogue through communities such as those driven by new-generation activists is more effective for the younger generation than the intellectual-academic elite. In responding to diversity issues and interfaith dialog among the younger generation, they are also getting closer. Interfaith dialogue movements carried out by young people can be a bridge to understanding the diversity of each individual's background. Young people involved in interfaith dialogue activities are committed to interfaith understanding and cooperation (Patel, E., & Brodeur, 2006).

Other studies explain that interfaith dialogue activities driven by young people aim to create a peaceful, tolerant, inclusive, and harmonious society (Banawiratma et al., 2010; Husein, 2019). The interfaith dialogue movement carried out by young people has positively contributed to changes in religious organizations in society, including young people towards conservation (Pramudji Kuntjoro-Jakti, 2022). The post-truth era has become a challenge for interfaith dialogue activists, followed by the emergence of hoaxes, hatred, fake news, and the truth of information based on personal beliefs and tendencies. The interfaith dialogue movement can be a strategy for building a space for open civil dialogue meetings for society (Patel, E., & Brodeur, 2006; Widiyanto, 2023). Young people can use various social media platform facilities to create narratives of tolerance and moderation values on social media. The interfaith dialogue movement by young people has enabled them to guarantee the desire for civic values, intercultural relations, interfaith, and social advocacy (Kusuma & Susilo, 2020). In addition to men, women also play an active and significant role in promoting religious tolerance. They are directly involved in everyday dialogue through social interactions in informal spaces (Manuain et al., 2024). Another study on the involvement of young people as driving agents in peace issues in Padang City has been mentioned by Ashadi (2022). Pelita Padang, as a relatively new organization in peace and peace issues, requires insight into peace activism for the various advocacies carried out. He emphasized the importance of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach as a foundation in the strategic plan of the Pelita Padang

organization (Wahyuni & Ashadi, 2022).

Based on the trend of previous studies, many studies emphasized the role of mainstream Islamic organizations in providing counter-religious conservatism by cultivating religious moderation values through their organizations. In optimizing the role of mainstream Islamic organizations, counter-conservatives through educational institutions must be promoted massively in schools. Although a small number of studies on interfaith community activists in conducting interreligious dialogue have been touched upon by previous researchers, it is still minimal that given the primary attention of young people involved in the interfaith youth community (Pelita) to be a driving force in promoting diversity issues in a structural and cultural social context dominated by conservative practices in various aspects, such as political-governmental, socio-cultural, economic and religious institutions. Countering religious conservatism in such a situation has many challenges and obstacles in promoting the values of tolerance in West Sumatra. On that basis, young people involved in interfaith youth communities can become agents of change as a driving force in promoting tolerance in people's lives.

From the tendency of previous studies, the interfaith advocacy counter-narrative activities of religious conservatism carried out by Interfaith Youth (Pelita) Padang in advocating diversity issues in West Sumatra have not fully main attention. The counter-narrative activities of religious conservatism can be a lesson learned for activists of diversity issues driven by young people. Based on the tendency of previous studies, the counter-narrative activities of religious conservatism carried out by Interfaith Youth (Pelita) Padang in advocating diversity issues in West Sumatra have yet to be given primary attention. The counter-narrative activities of religious conservatism can be a lesson learned for activists of diversity issues driven by young people.

This research significantly contributes to the existing body of knowledge by examining how interfaith advocacy counter-narratives of religious conservatism, enacted by young Pelita members, shape discourse and social practices on diversity issues in West Sumatra. Understanding these counter-narrative activities is crucial for comprehending the production and reproduction of religious discourse contestation in the Muslim public sphere in West Sumatra. The diverse activities undertaken by Pelita have played a pivotal role in constructing an alternative religious counter-discourse to various discourses and practices of religious conservatism. In particular, this research delves into how the Interfaith Advocacy Youth Community (Pelita) crafts and disseminates counter-narratives to challenge the dominant narrative of religious conservatism. A comprehensive understanding of these counter-narratives in their various dimensions can provide a problem-solving model and valuable lessons for the development of action plans to counter religious conservatism in West Sumatra.

RESEARCH METHOD

Religious conservatism has widely developed and expanded in various fields of life. The strengthening of religious conservatism can trigger the development of intolerance and, at a more extreme level, has the potential to lead to religious radicalism (Burhani, 2020a). This article focuses on the involvement of young people in countering the narrative of religious conservatism in Padang City, as one of the predominantly Muslim regions. Based on the Setara Institute's Index of Tolerant Cities (IKT) assessment (2023), Padang is one of the least tolerant cities in Indonesia.

In this study, the Interfaith Youth (Pelita) of Padang, which is the motor of the counter-narrative movement of Islamic conservatism in West Sumatra, is used as the unit of analysis. The view of Islamic conservatism that causes the phenomenon of intolerance, especially since the holding of the 2019 General Election, has become the basis for the formation of the Interfaith Youth (Pelita) community in Padang City. The focus of the community is based on religious diversity; Pelita moves massively to initiate and advocate for meeting spaces for talks and mass actions to achieve a humanist West Sumatra for non-Muslim communities. The absence of an equal conversation

space between conflicting parties causes intolerance cases. Pelita tries to build a meeting space so that every interest of the conflicting parties can be conveyed. By studying the community that moves on behalf of humanity, a portrait of the role played by Pelita as a counter-narrative movement of Islamic conservatism can be understood.

This research uses a qualitative method with a case study approach. Case studies were used to understand the background of a problem or the interaction of specific individuals or groups in a social unit to comprehensively understand whether certain people, events, settings, or events operate or function according to their context. In the context of this research, the role of Interfaith Youth was studied more deeply through in-depth interviews and direct observations related to the strategy of the Pelita Youth Community tried to counter the narrative of conservatism that has developed massively, triggering cases of intolerance that have occurred in recent years.

The primary data source for this research is interviews with the management of the Interfaith Youth. The secondary data, obtained from documents, news, and the internet, serves as both initial information and supporting information for the intellectual credibility of the research being studied. This comprehensive approach ensures a thorough understanding of the role of Interfaith Youth in countering conservatism and intolerance.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Interfaith Youth Advocacy Community (Pelita) as a Driver of Counter-Islamic Conservatism in West Sumatra

Interfaith Youth (Pelita) refers to an activity carried out by young West Sumatran women who are active in community inclusiveness, respect for diversity, and encourage non-discriminatory policies. Youth Across Religions (PELITA) in Padang City was founded by three young people from West Sumatra who were concerned about the increasing cases of intolerance in Indonesia, especially in West Sumatra. They are Angelique Maria Cuaca (Chinese/Catholic descent), Silmi Novita Nurman (Minang descent/Muhammadiyah Islam), and Riki Alviano (Javanese descent/NU Islam) (Wahyuni & Ashadi, 2022). The name Pelita originally referred to the activities of the Interfaith Youth (Pelita). However, in its development, Pelita Padang changed its name to Pelita for Peace and Diversity. The founders initiated various activities to build bridges between interfaith youth in Padang City. Pelita Padang uses three main approaches in its advocacy efforts. The first is using social activities such as free vaccination services and social assistance during the pandemic. Second, diversity education and training. Third, networking with other partners on broader human rights issues and their linkages with other sectoral issues, such as agrarian issues (*Pelita Padang: Membangun Toleransi Di Tengah Polarisasi*, 2023).

Established on 10 November 2019, it differs from its interfaith name. Pelita was born due to the political turmoil and rift in society in the 2019 elections. The founders of Pelita witnessed how the Indonesian people, young and old, were divided and disputed because of different choices of candidate pairs; for this reason, the founders of Pelita took the initiative to create a meeting room forum that initially consisted of students. The meeting room attracted a variety of diverse and different people, and on 10 November 2019, the meeting room turned into Pelita, which is known today. However, at that time, Pelita was only limited to an ordinary student forum/community; Pelita was still limited to conducting various events and activities that introduced diversity to the community. Precisely, in May 2022, Pelita officially became a Foundation. By becoming a foundation, Pelita officially became a legal entity. Pelita, being an official legal entity, can help Pelita engage with various issues of Freedom of religion and belief in West Sumatra. When there is an issue as threatening as this, Pelita can be involved in resolving religious freedom issues, and a legal umbrella also protects Pelita's movements. By becoming a foundation, Pelita has been able to fulfill its purpose of peace and diversity. Pelita moves alone and collaborates with various institutions, such as the ombudsman. Currently, Pelita is not only limited to defending religious

rights but, more broadly, by defending diversity and human rights. Informal meetings are held regularly and bring in speakers to discuss topics such as the constitutional right of Indonesians to worship and the root causes of religious and cultural conflicts (Jamet, 2023).

Pelita's presence is to bring change in West Sumatra by defending diversity and the rights of people who are discriminated against. Pelita also brings renewal to the social aspects of its society. Pelita Padang often organizes interfaith dialogues, film discussions, and writing competitions, mainly focusing on religious diversity. It also works actively on issues with other organizations in West Sumatra. The activities carried out by the Pelita organization can be seen from the various social activities carried out, such as support for the right to freedom of religion and belief (KBB) in public services, peace campaigns, multicultural events, collaboration of cultural activities with other organizations, and other significant themes related to humanity, peace, freedom of religion and belief. (<https://Pelitapadang.Org>, n.d.)

Pelita's Perspective on the Context of Islamic Conservatism in West Sumatra

Pelita, as an interfaith advocacy organization, emerged due to the cases and events of intolerance in West Sumatra. As one of the regions that has a solid structural and cultural Islamic tradition marked by the rise of Islamic shari'a nuanced regulations, it has the potential to violate people's religious beliefs and freedoms, especially those related to non-Muslims. In mediating this intolerance issue. In addition, Pelita is present and moves on the anxiety a group of young people felt during the tension in the 2019 General Election, which at that time was tension between communities.

Pelita has a view of respecting the local identity of the Minangkabau people, as well as the traditions and religious practices that exist in the people of West Sumatra. It will not in any way lead to interfering in the affairs of conservatism based on local identities that develop in West Sumatra based on *Adat bersendikan syari'at, syari'at bersendikan kitabullah* (*adat basyandi syara' syara' basandi kitabullah*.) However, Pelita tries to create more spaces for encounters. Thus, Pelita hopes that more people will attend and have a better view of the world. Of course, Pelita has challenges dealing with conservative approaches to religion in a changing society. The main challenge faced by Pelita is that not all levels of society have felt the presence of Pelita itself because the thinking of some people in West Sumatra, such as the elderly, is not yet open-minded.

The challenge in diversity issues in West Sumatra is religious conservatism. Pelita needs time to face these challenges. Pelita is still around four years old, and reaching out to networks requires a process that must be completed on time. For example, Pelita reached out to the Religious Harmony Forum (FKUB) in July 2023. This approach is only said to be towards informal institutions, not to mention formal institutions, which are still filled with people who are dominant in conservative thinking. The Vice Chairman of Pelita revealed to us that the challenge needed in approaching formal institutions or government agencies is how Pelita conducts hearings to see the response of formal institutions to Pelita.

Although in West Sumatra, almost all elements support conservatism, both based on custom and religion, Pelita sees the adaptation of cultural changes and emerging values by appreciating all forms of culture that are very diverse. There is no intention or purpose of Pelita to plunge someone into liberal schools. Instead, Pelita seeks to invite people who have conservative thoughts to look openly at the value of diversity and embrace each other without looking at social status, religion, or certain ethnicities.

In various activities that we do, we more often invite the younger generation who have thoughts similar to their vision and mission; they hope that the establishment of a meeting space with the older generation is the emergence of active and healthy communication to produce understanding and eliminate prejudices that have arisen before. With the establishment of the meeting room, Pelita tries to reach out to the older generation to communicate their goals and programs so that in the future, there will be no destructive perceptions or prejudices about the

diversity program carried out by Pelita.

Countering narratives against religious conservatism is not easy. However, Pelita seeks to counter existing religious conservatism by appreciating all forms of cultural change and new emerging values; Pelita is a decomposer of existing tensions. The homework for Pelita in this issue is to try to create a space for encounters with those who have a view of conservatism, especially the elderly, who always consider young people as a generation that does not know tradition, religion, and culture. This prejudice from the older generation causes the older generation to view the younger generation as challenging to manage.

In West Sumatra, religion is very embedded in society, namely Islam, which can be seen from the trend of regulations issued by the local government. Regional medium-term development plans in West Sumatra are seen to adopt many Islamic religious laws. West Sumatra is one of the regions that applies the most nuanced rules of Islamic sharia. The implementation of Islamic sharia in West Sumatra is the second largest after West Java, following other regions in Indonesia (Buehler & Muhtada, 2016).

Conservative teachings on religion are more closely associated with the older generation because they believe, and it is tough to accept differences because perhaps conservative thinking has been attached to them for a long time. It is a big challenge to establish relationships and change this for Pelita, and this applies not only to the general public but also to officials who make regulations and policies taken by the government that are thick with religious and ethnic teachings. In addition, the problem of intolerance or conservatism can occur due to other factors, such as the case on the South Coast, where there was a rejection and prohibition of workers from Nias from practicing their religious worship. This is based on the problems of the where they work with the local community.

Pelita Community Activities in the Counter Narrative Movement of Islamic Conservatism in West Sumatra

Pelita Padang aims to increase awareness and participation of the younger generation in the issue of freedom of religion and belief in West Sumatra. We hope that the active participation of young people can help build a tolerant community that is more respectful of religious and cultural differences. Pelita is a movement based on progressive Islamic values, which bases its existence on diversity through struggle in the context of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*. Although progressive Islam offers an open view of modern values, Pelita views diversity as an essential element in upholding religious equality and diversity in society. In its foundation, Pelita emphasizes the importance of upholding basic human rights principles without ignoring the essence of religious diversity. While progressive Islam places a focus on renewing the interpretation and application of religious values in a modern context, Pelita takes an inclusive stance towards all religions, creating space for various understandings of religion and different religious views.

By supporting *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, Pelita builds a foundation for unity in diversity. Through an open and inclusive approach, Pelita promotes interfaith dialogue. Cross-faith and recognizes that the values of diversity are a force that enriches a pluralistic society spiritually, socially, and culturally. In essence, Pelita represents the spirit of harmonious diversity and equality within the framework of progressive Islamic thought that is open to changes in the context of the times. Despite its significant role in promoting peace and tolerance, Pelita is often viewed as controversial by conservatives. This view is due to the perception that the narrative of peace and tolerance carried by Pelita can be considered a threat to traditional values. The sensitive issue of freedom of religion and belief (KBB), especially in West Sumatra, is the main trigger for this perception.

The Interfaith Advocacy Youth Community (Pelita) Padang has been active in opposing conservatism by providing assistance in the case of the Christmas ban in Dharmasraya in 2019 and the case of the ban on the use of the hijab at SMK Negeri 2 Padang in 2021. According to Angelique Maria Cuaca, a Pelita activist, the experience of these cases has taught me the

importance of sharing roles and focusing on victims during the advocacy process. In addition to supporting the Christmas ban case, Pelita also assisted in the case of the hijab ban at SMK 2 Padang, providing legal and psychological assistance to victims and collaborating with other organizations such as the Ombudsman, Komnas HAM, and academics. The role of the media is also recognized as crucial in voicing these cases. Advocacy is carried out through a collaborative approach with various parties, without anyone trying to be a hero. The main focus is on protecting victims by maintaining their psychological well-being. Despite facing various threats, the diversity of tasks is distributed well so that victims feel protected and policies can be improved. In the case of the hijab ban at SMK 2 Padang, Pelita reported the case to the Ombudsman, who then investigated and found that there had been a violation of the rules. Although the school apologized, the case was still considered a violation of students' rights. Collaboration in advocacy proved effective, and other cases began to request assistance afterward. Lessons from previous advocacy cases, such as the Christmas ban in Dharmasraya and Sijunjung handled by the Center for Inter-Community Studies (Pusaka), were also taken by Pelita. The difference is that Pusaka only involved their coordinator without collaborating with other organizations. This resulted in its challenges, especially when dealing with the majority conservative group. After the Christmas ban case in Dharmasraya and Sijunjung, the Pusaka Padang Coordinator became a suspect on charges of hate speech related to the advocacy carried out by his organization (Interviewed with, Angelique Maria Cuaca, 2022).

In various activities carried out by Pelita, we must consider a more inclusive narrative and align activities with a general theme. Flyers or promotional materials created must carry a narrative that avoids controversy, encourages open dialogue, and promotes unity. With this approach, Pelita can be more effective in spreading the message of peace without triggering unwanted debate or division. Success in adopting a unifying narrative will allow Pelita to expand its reach and impact in fighting for the values of peace and tolerance in the midst of a diverse society. Pelita, an organization that acts as a mediator between policy makers and minorities, has taken strategic steps to reduce the level of intolerance. Through a series of discussions with policy makers in August and September, Pelita emphasized the importance of policies that do not discriminate against minorities. The biggest challenge faced is the tendency of policy makers to listen more to the aspirations of the majority. For example, Fauzi Bahar's policy on the use of the hijab for female students is one of the decisions that triggered a negative response. Although considered a circular, the less comprehensive socialization caused dissatisfaction and tension.

Pelita seeks to change this paradigm by voicing the need for inclusive policies, creating space for the aspirations of all parties. Through dialogue and advocacy, Pelita plays a role in encouraging policymakers to listen to the voices of all communities, not just the majority. With this approach, Pelita hopes to help formulate more inclusive policies and reduce discrimination against minorities, creating a more just and harmonious society.

The 2024 election is essential for Pelita to reduce intolerance and maintain unity. Pelita members are prohibited from participating in political parties in the spirit of maintaining neutrality. Those who wish to be involved in the political process must take a temporary leave from their membership. Committing not to campaign in the election is a central pillar for Pelita members. They are not allowed to show tendencies or preferences towards any candidate. This is a crucial step in ensuring that within the Pelita structure, there are no partisan views that disrupt unity.

The importance of neutrality is also reflected in internal discussions at Pelita. It is forbidden to discuss preferences for competing presidential candidates. This creates an inclusive environment and emphasizes the value of unity, not division. Through these policies, Pelita plays a vital role in forming a society based on harmony and unity, ensuring that each member is a symbol of neutrality and unity, viewing each candidate objectively without any tendency towards division. The upcoming general election is a crucial moment for the country's future.

For this reason, Pelita suggests to the younger and older generations not to close themselves off from religious conservatism in facing the 2024 General Election. First, Encourage an Inclusive

Understanding of Religion. Pelita encourages all generations to broaden their understanding of religion by respecting differences and interacting with various religious groups. This deepens tolerance and opens up opportunities to understand different views. Second, openness and expanding relationships. It is important not to invite or associate with people who have similar thoughts. Pelita encourages expanding social circles and being open to differences in religion, ethnicity, and personal tendencies to create an inclusive discussion space.

Third, the younger generation is invited to participate actively in activities strengthening interfaith relations. This involvement can broaden horizons, deepen understanding of pluralism, and increase awareness of the importance of tolerance and diversity in society. Fourth, elections are based on track records and rational decisions. In facing the election, choosing candidates based on positive track records and clear visions is essential. Pelita advises the generation to conduct in-depth research on candidates, look at their digital footprints, and choose candidates who are considered to have the necessary integrity and competence. The 2024 election is an opportunity for all generations to choose leaders who are able to unite with inclusive wisdom. By expanding religious understanding, openness to differences, and rational elections, it is hoped that Indonesia can build a better future for all its citizens.

The challenge in fighting for freedom of religion and belief (KBB) issues in West Sumatra is the importance of accepting differences (Delmus Puneri Salim, Srifani Simbuka, 2016). Acceptance of diversity can bring improvement, given the stigma associated with diversity in society. These diversity issues create stigmas that involve many people, such as the perception that Minang people tend to be intolerant. Such labeling is not only dangerous but also misguided in exacerbating ethnic stigmatization. Ethnic or tribal identity and individual character must be separated because generalizing identity issues can have negative impacts. A person's behavior cannot be generalized, especially if it is not related to their ethnicity. Many cases do not represent the views of the entire community, and identity issues are often exploited for political interests. Society often fluctuates in its attitudes toward identity issues, depending on existing interests. While identity issues are often politicized on the one hand, social and economic issues are often ignored on the other. People who exploit identity issues for political interests often form alliances with politicians. There are many cases of hate speech carried out in mosques by groups that feel threatened. However, unfortunately, moderate Islamic groups tend to be reluctant to play a role here, even though they have great potential in carrying out counter-narratives. In addition, moderate groups tend to allow the dominant discourse to be owned by conservative groups. Based on the above phenomenon, it can be said that young people have a vital role in interfaith dialogue activities, interfaith dialogues, and in carrying out counter-narratives of religious conservatism based on community organizations. Due to the community's various activities, it has become a unique attraction for young people. Young people can be initiators as movers in advancing inclusive and harmonious social life. Amidst the dominance of religious conservatism, young people have quite a great interest in diversity issues that are developing in society. The gap in understanding between the majority of the older generation, who are pro-status quo in supporting conservatism, and the younger generation, who tend to be open to new ideas, has created an alternative narrative of religious understanding in people's lives. This strategy reflects the practice of *dialogue of life and action* as developed by Qurtuby (2025), in which everyday interactions and empathy serve as key bridges for building interfaith understanding. Skepticism toward interfaith movements often arises because conservative narratives are positioned as unquestionable cultural and religious identities. However, Pelita attempts to overcome this challenge through a strategy of deep dialogue, in which an approach based on equality, empathy, and non-judgmental communication serves as a primary tool to reduce prejudice. As stated by Qurtuby, "dialogue is not about winning, but about mutual learning." (Al Qurtuby, 2025).

At least the counter-narrative of religious conservatism can reduce or become an alternative discourse amid the contestation of religious understanding in the public sphere. This finding aligns with Jati et al. (2022), who stated that the new generation of interfaith dialogue activists adopt more community-based advocacy movements. Changes in interfaith dialogue in the pre-

reform era that emphasized the role of public intellectuals shifted towards community advocacy after the New Order. This change was caused by changes in the mode and response to interfaith movement issues in society. After the New Order, the diversity activist movement came more from the community than from prominent public intellectuals. This community-based approach is considered more effective because it also collaborates with various social organizations to promote social inclusion in society. Young people who were initially less interested in diversity issues are slowly becoming interested in social diversity issues (Jati et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

Religious conservatism has increased since the last two decades in various fields of religious life in West Sumatra. Although there are various activities in religious moderation towards society and also strengthening the role of mainstream mass organizations such as Muhammadiyah, Nahdatul Ulama (NU), and Perti (Persatuan Tarbiyah Islamiyah), it has not fully shown a counter-discourse to the dominance of religious conservatism. The community-based counter-narrative movement carried out by Pelita (Pemuda Lintas Agama) in carrying out a counter-narrative of religious conservatism has become a special attraction for young people in Padang City. Young people have a considerable interest in issues of diversity that are developing in West Sumatra. In various activities carried out in responding to issues of diversity, it is quite effective in carrying out counter-narratives to various monolithic religious views. Counter-narratives of religious conservatism are needed as a form of religious variant and alternative views in religious attitudes. The weakness of the counter-narrative of religious conservatism, both carried out by intellectuals and moderate Islamic organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah in carrying out counter-narratives on religious conservatism, has led to the dominance of religious conservatism. Conservative groups have shown increasing activity in responding to socio-political and religious issues. At the same time, moderate groups also seem to allow or are permissive of the production of discourse developed by conservative groups.

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